

# Yosemite Valley Free Climbs

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S U P E R T O P O S

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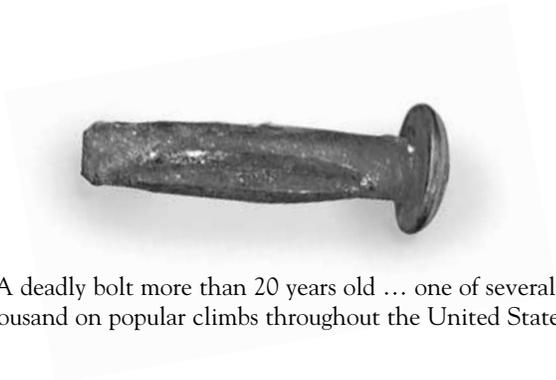
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A deadly bolt more than 20 years old ... one of several thousand on popular climbs throughout the United States.



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We need YOUR help. The American Safe Climbing Association has helped replace more than 3,000 bolts throughout the country and over 1,300 in Yosemite Valley alone. We estimate that there are more than 20,000 bad bolts remaining on popular climbs today. Your \$50 donation will make at least one route safe . . . and that one route could be the next one you climb. The ASCA would like to get there before you do.

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## Preface

When Tom Frost talks, most people listen. As I was writing the first SuperTopo book, *Yosemite Big Walls*, I ran into Tom in the Yosemite Lodge Cafeteria. We talked a bit and as I was leaving I asked, “Do you think I should put first ascent stories in the book?” Just as I hoped he wouldn’t say, Tom shot back a resounding “Yes!”

Damn. My nearly completed book would be delayed for months as I made almost a hundred phone calls to interview first ascensionists. But Tom was right—the book was vastly improved, and history has now become an essential component of all subsequent SuperTopo books. This time around we are fortunate to have preeminent Yosemite historian Steve Roper telling the fascinating stories behind the climbs as well as contributing profiles of some of the major players.

For this next major SuperTopo print book, I again consulted Tom. He believed that guidebooks had recently become geared toward elite free climbers. He longed for the old guides that were filled with more moderate routes, and included information on when you could get through a tough spot by pulling on gear. According to Tom, “In the 1960s we used to climb everything because the guidebook was friendly and because we always had the aid slings handy to pull through the hard sections. For us, climbing wasn’t just about numbers. Instead, doing the classic routes up Yosemite’s more-than-awesome walls was the adventure. Surviving it, and doing something we could free, was the icing on the cake.”

Heeding Tom’s advice, in this book we aim to make it clear when it’s possible to pull through a crux on gear. We also scoured the Valley for obscure but quality climbs in the 5.4 to 5.9 range. By bringing to light many of these lesser known routes we hope to provide more ways to avoid crowds.

Like *Yosemite Big Walls*, this is a select guidebook. We chose the climbs using basically one guideline: Would you recommend this climb to a friend? We also skewed the route selection to well-protected routes in the 5.4 to 5.11 range. Using our standard procedure of climbing every route ourselves to make sure the information is accurate, we focused on routes that the greatest number of people could enjoy. In future editions we will include more 5.10 to 5.12 routes (as well as any additional 5.5 to 5.9 routes that we come across).

We hope this book inspires many climbing adventures. Please let us know how the book helped your climbing trip and then, gently, please tell us how it can be improved. A guidebook is always a work-in-progress. We will continually work to make *Yosemite Valley Free Climbs* the best resource possible with which to enjoy the magic of Yosemite.



Chris McNamara  
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## Introduction

by Chris McNamara

Yosemite is much more than a valley with 3000-foot rock walls and incredible climbing. It is an outlet for the energies of the world's most passionate and adventurous people. Yosemite inspires the souls of climbers and non-climbers to reach for something beyond themselves and to travel to a place—physical and mental—where they have never been before. Few climbers can resist Yosemite; nearly every climber who has the opportunity to get to Yosemite manages to make the trip.

The first visit to Yosemite is overwhelming—there's so much rock on an incomparable scale. First, the big walls dominate your view: El Capitan, Half Dome, and Sentinel. They seem too massive to be of this world, let alone climbable. Next, you look at all the small cliffs between their giant neighbors. Wait a minute . . . those "small" cliffs are more than 500 feet high! Is this place real? It's all a bit hard to comprehend at first. There is little to which you can compare Yosemite's walls other than tall buildings, which isn't much of a comparison. All this rock of such unfathomable size fills you with both fear and anticipation. Yet as daunting as the rock faces in Yosemite appear to be, they scream to be climbed. And that's why you've come here.

### Yosemite Climbing Skills

At first, Yosemite climbs feel weird and insecure. They demand strength and technique not easily acquired at your local gym or crag. The slick, glacier-polished rock has few handholds. Instead, you jam your hands and feet in cracks and smear your feet on, well, sometimes on nothing. There is more balance and subtlety involved

than brute strength. When your natural instinct is to grab and pull, often you need to relax and balance.

At first, don't be surprised if you find yourself yelling down to your partner, "This 5.9 feels like 5.11!" The good news is that Yosemite climbs are within your grasp—they just take extra patience and resolve. Take solace in the fact that all new Yosemite climbers get humbled at some point but they eventually develop the subtle skills necessary to move up Yosemite granite. The more time you spend on the rock and the more technique you build, the more climbing opens up to you. Suddenly the thousand-foot-tall walls shrink a little and don't seem as intimidating. Before too long you're planning your ascent of The Nose of El Cap.

Unfortunately, there are few easy climbs to introduce you to Yosemite climbing. We searched the Park for every easy and moderate route worth climbing and put them in this book. However, there still isn't much at the lower end of the spectrum. If you're looking for 5.7 and easier climbs, be prepared to bunch up on a few crowded routes. It's not until you climb 5.8 and harder that your options start opening up in Yosemite. If you cannot lead 5.8 or harder, it's a good idea to climb with someone who is familiar with the area and can give you pointers, set up topropes, and lead you up multi-pitch routes.

Most climbing in Yosemite is traditional climbing where you climb cracks and place your own gear. But the crack technique here is difficult, and it's not an ideal place to learn. It is best to have your gear-placing, anchor-setting, and rope-managing skills dialed before visiting. Your best bet is to start top roping the very lowest grades of cracks. Once familiar with the rock, try out some one-pitch leads and then move on to the multi-pitch climbs.

Overall, Yosemite is not a great sport climbing destination, but we highlight about 40 well-bolted climbs, mostly in the 5.10 and 5.11 range. In general, most bolted climbs easier than 5.10 are runout except for about ten well-bolted 5.8 and 5.9 routes in this book.

Tommy Caldwell on Pitch 6 (5.12c) of Lurking Fear. (Corey Rich)

### Equipment

It's hard to climb in Yosemite without a full trad rack of cams from .5-4" and two sets of stoppers. For the bigger cracks (1-4") almost any brand of cam will do. For the thin pin-scarred cracks, Aliens work best. On most climbs you will also want about eight quickdraws and eight slings to reduce rope drag because many pitches wander. A cordalette is useful for equalizing gear in a natural belay.

Most pitches in Yosemite are 90 to 130 feet long so a 50m rope works fine. However, a 10mm x 60m rope has become the Yosemite standard because it allows you to link pitches and it gives you more options for setting up topropes at the crags. For some crags and most multi-pitch routes where you must descend by rappel, you will need a second rope to get down. (8mm is a good diameter).

On long routes, avoid the hassle of climbing with a pack by using a Camelback and clipping your lightweight hiking shoes to your harness. The Camelback holds enough water for most long climbs as well as space for a few essentials such as food, a small LED headlamp, super-compact rain shell, sunscreen, and cell phone.



Corey Rich

### Anchor Conditions

Since 1997, the American Safe Climbing Association has replaced more than 1,300 bolts in Yosemite Valley. While most popular climbs now have safe bolts, be aware that some bad bolts remain. View which routes the ASCA has replaced at the ASCA web site, [www.safeclimbing.org](http://www.safeclimbing.org) and please make a tax-deductible donation. Even a mere five dollars will replace at least one bolt. And that bad bolt could be the one that blows on somebody!

### Essential Yosemite Beta

Below we list some fundamental information for planning a trip to Yosemite. However, for more updated and extensive information you should visit the Yosemite Beta Page on the SuperTopo web site: [www.supertopo.com/climbingareas/yosemite.html](http://www.supertopo.com/climbingareas/yosemite.html)

### Getting There

#### Air Travel

The closest major international airports are Oakland International (3.5-hour drive) and San Francisco International (4-hour drive). Of the two, Oakland is preferred because it's less chaotic and 30 minutes closer to Yosemite. Sacramento International is also a 4-hour drive from Yosemite but has fewer connecting flights. Fresno Yosemite International is only a 3-hour drive but offers the fewest flights. Since all of these airports are about the same distance from Yosemite, shop around for the best fares. Some climbers fly into Los Angeles International, which is a 7-hour drive to Yosemite.

#### Train Travel

The train is not the fastest way to Yosemite but it's a cool way to travel. From Emeryville (a 20-minute bus ride from San Francisco) take Amtrak to Merced and board the Via Bus to Yosemite. There are three runs from Merced in the morning and one at 5:25 P.M. The cost is \$20 round trip from Merced to Yosemite. From Los Angeles, Amtrak has a bus to Bakersfield that connects with a train to Merced. From there take the Via Bus to Yosemite.

**Bus Travel**

Short of having a car, the bus is the best way to get from a major airport to Yosemite. From Oakland, San Francisco, or Los Angeles take the Greyhound Bus to Merced and then the Via Bus to Yosemite. Plan a full day of travel if riding the bus. From June to November you can only reach Yosemite from Mammoth by the YARTS bus.

**Car Travel**

There are four state highways that access Yosemite: 120 from the west, 120 from the east, 140 from the west, and 41 from the southwest. The fastest access from the San Francisco Bay Area is 120. Highway 140 is the best option if coming from Los Angeles or Fresno. Highway 140 is also the lowest elevation road and offers the best winter access if 120 and 41 have chain controls (chains are rarely required on 140).

Highway 120 from the east (aka The Tioga Pass Road) offers the best summertime access from Bishop, Utah, Nevada, and eastern states. However, this road closes after the first major winter storm (usually in November) and doesn't open until the snow melts (usually late May). To access Yosemite from the east in winter, you must get to the west side access roads by driving north through Tahoe or south through Bakersfield.

Rent a car at any airport or major city. International climbers who stay in the United States for more than a month often buy a used car in San Francisco or Los Angeles and sell it (or scrap it) at the end of their trip. To find a cheap car, look in the local papers or on [www.craigslist.org](http://www.craigslist.org).

Many people stay in Yosemite without a car. Renting a car is expensive and it's possible to reach most climbs by the free park shuttle bus. However, the shuttle does not serve areas west of Camp 4, including El Capitan, Leaning Tower, Cookie Cliff, and Reeds Pinnacle. To reach these areas without a car, hitchhike or ride a bike.

NOTE: Major changes are planned for Yosemite that will greatly affect transportation inside the Valley. Check the SuperTopo web site for the most current information on changing car restrictions and bus routes.

**Driving times and distances to Yosemite Valley**

From	Time (hours)	Distance (miles)
Boulder, CO*	20:00	1,254
Fresno, CA	2:20	90
Truckee, CA	4:00	240
Los Angeles, CA	6:00	311
Mammoth, CA*	2:30	95
Oakland, CA	4:00	172
Sacramento, CA	4:00	174
Salt Lake City, UT*	12:00	707
San Francisco, CA	4:00	192
Tuolumne Meadows	1:30	60

\*Driving times are 2 to 4 hours longer when Tioga pass is closed, usually from November to May.

**When to Climb**

Yosemite has some of the best weather of any climbing area in the United States, but nasty storms occur throughout the year. Because the climbs start from elevations between 2,800 and 7,500 feet, there is usually some place with good climbing temperatures most of the year. Spring and fall have the best climbing weather. Summer cragging is usually uncomfortably hot but the longer and higher routes can be cool enough. Winter can have good climbing weather but can also have months of severe Sierra storms. A dry November is our favorite time in Yosemite—perfect temps in the sun and no crowds. For current road and weather conditions call 209-372-0200 AND check the many online forecasts.

**Seasons**

**November–March** The Valley empties of climbers and tourists, which creates a more pristine setting and unspoiled feel in the Valley. During this time there is usually an equal number of clear and stormy days. Most of the long routes at higher elevations are too wet or cold, but there are many sunny and dry cragging areas, mainly west of the Highway 140/120 junction in Lower Merced Canyon. When bad weather rolls in, things get nasty very quickly. Pacific storms usually bring three days of heavy snow or

rain but can last up to a week or longer. Usually it only takes a day for most sunny crags to dry out after a storm. If a two-week storm system rolls in, it's time to ski or snowboard at Badger Pass in Yosemite or head to Joshua Tree. If camping in the Valley during the winter, prepare for long cold nights.

**April–May 15** Walls and the Valley are still uncrowded. It's warmer, but there is the same 50/50 chance of getting either good or miserable weather. If you are traveling from far away this is a risky time to visit, especially if you only have a week or less of vacation. Most of the long climbs are still too wet or cold, but the crags are dry.

**May 15–June** Perfect weather and big crowds of both tourists and climbers. Long days make this a great time to do a lengthy multi-pitch route.

**July–August** The Valley is still crowded with tourists, but the climbs are uncrowded as most people head to Tuolumne for cooler weather. While Valley floor temperatures are often in the 90s and 100s, temperatures on the walls 500 feet above the Valley are usually comfortable in the 70s and low 80s. Prepare for the heat with plenty of extra water.

**September–October** The Valley is crowded with tourists and climbers. The weather is generally perfect except for the occasional lingering heat wave. The first winter storm usually arrives in late October or early November.

#### **Staying in the Park**

Yosemite Valley is a small tourist town filled with buildings, roads, cars, and people. The bad news is that the restaurants, stores, and motel-like rooms take away from the natural beauty of the park. The good news is that these same things make the Valley quite accommodating. You will find pizza, burgers, groceries, climbing gear, a medical clinic, motels, swimming pools, rafts, bike rentals, and if you find yourself in an unfortunate situation, a jail.

Month	Average precipitation	Max/min temp in degrees F
January	6.35"	47/25
February	6.64"	55/26
March	5.87"	58/30
April	3.29"	65/34
May	1.48"	71/39
June	.51"	80/46
July	.29"	89/50
August	.06"	89/50
September	.55"	82/48
October	1.68"	72/39
November	3.49"	57/30
December	7.10"	49/26

#### **Camping**

Camp 4 is the historic center of American climbing. It is also Yosemite's only walk-in campground and the cheapest place to stay. No reservations are required, but during peak season (May–October) expect a long wait to secure a campsite. The cost is \$5 per person per night with a 14-day limit on your stay. Each six-person site is a twenty-foot-square patch of dirt with fire pit and picnic table. If there are fewer than six people in your group you will share the site with others. There is a bathroom and a sink in the middle of Camp 4, but no warm water or showers. A bulletin board next to the Ranger Kiosk offers the chance to find climbing partners, friends, and used climbing gear. All other Yosemite campgrounds require reservations during peak season. Call 800-436-PARK to make reservations or go online to: <http://reservations.nps.gov>

There are a variety of places to camp outside the park boundary on Forest Service Land. Check out the Forest Service web site for more info: [www.r5.fs.fed.us](http://www.r5.fs.fed.us)

#### **Lodges and Cabins**

In addition to campsites, there are more plush accommodations available in Yosemite. If you are ready to pay the big bucks, you can stay at the lovely Ahwahnee

Hotel, or for a more modest price you can crash in a motel-like room at the Yosemite Lodge or a canvas-topped cabin in Curry Village. Also, vacation homes are located just minutes out of the Valley in Foresta (with views of the summit of El Capitan and Half Dome). Check out the awesome cabins at [www.4yosemite.com](http://www.4yosemite.com) or call 800-723-4112 and ask about the climbers' specials. In the summertime your best bet is to make reservations well in advance of your visit. Spaces fill up early for lodges and cabins in the tourist season of June–September.

#### Food

Groceries are available in the Valley at the Village Store, Curry Village Store, or Lodge Store, but it is much cheaper to buy groceries in Oakdale, Merced, or Oakhurst on the drive to Yosemite.

There are a variety of restaurants in the Valley that serve everything from pizza and deli sandwiches to the spendy stuff at the Ahwahnee Hotel. Here is a quick listing of some of the Valley restaurants by location:

**Yosemite Lodge:** “The Cafe” (cafeteria), Mountain Room Bar and Grill.

**Yosemite Village:** Degnan’s Deli, The Loft (pizza and pasta), burger stand.

**Curry Village:** Pizza Deck (with bar), cafeteria, taco shop, all-you-can-eat buffet.

#### Showers and Laundry

Showers cost \$2 (towel included) and are available at Housekeeping or Curry Village. Laundry is available at Housekeeping.

#### Climbing Gear and Climbing Guides

The Mountain Shop (209-372-8396), located in Curry Village, is one of the premiere climbing shops in The West. From bouldering pads to haulbags to the latest route beta, they have it all.

You can get climbing instruction, arrange for a guide, and also rent gear from the Yosemite Mountaineering School and Guide Service. There are also a variety of climbing shops in the San Francisco Bay Area where you can purchase gear. In San Francisco: Mission Cliffs and The North Face. In Berkeley: REI, Wilderness Exchange, Berkeley Ironworks, and Marmot Mountain Works.

If you are coming from the east side of the Sierra, then visit Wilson’s Eastside Sports in Bishop or Mammoth Mountaineering Supply in Mammoth—both have an extensive selection of rock climbing and mountaineering gear.

#### Bears

Bears have damaged cars for as little as a stick of gum or an empty soda can. If you want what’s yours to remain yours, remember three things: bears are hungry, smart, and strong. Bears are responsible for close to a thousand car break-ins every year in Yosemite, as all the shattered glass in the parking lots will tell you.

When bears smell food, even if it’s locked in your trunk or glove compartment, they shift into high gear. They get turned on by odors of containers that used to contain food, and for toothpaste and sunscreen. Bears don’t even need to smell food; they see something like a grocery bag or an ice chest, and associate it with food. In fact, they don’t need to see that much. If a bear notices clutter inside a car, he’ll think, “I wonder what’s under all that stuff?” and go to work.

Breaking into a car is a trivial exercise for a bear. He inserts his claws at the top of the door frame and pulls down. Then he climbs in and trashes the car. You can’t outsmart or out-muscle a bear. Stash your food in one of the bear-proof storage lockers provided by the Park Service at all campgrounds and throughout the Valley. Proper food storage is essential to protecting your property and more importantly the life of the bear. When a bear starts to endanger people it may be killed by the Park Service. Visit [www.nps.gov/yose/bears.htm](http://www.nps.gov/yose/bears.htm) for more info.

#### Poison Oak

Poison Oak grows sporadically throughout the Valley, especially in the Lower Merced Canyon west of the 120/140 junction. Find someone to show you what it looks like and be especially careful in the winter when poison oak loses its leaves and is difficult to see.

### Cell Phones

Should you or your partner get hurt while climbing, cell phones shorten the rescue response time. However, cell phones in the outdoors are annoying so keep them put away except for in emergencies. Cell phone coverage in Yosemite is spotty. There is generally decent reception between El Cap Meadow and Curry Village. As you gain elevation on a climb, the reception often improves. West of El Capitan the coverage deteriorates quickly. A good number to have programmed on your phone is the road and weather report: 209-372-0200.

### Rest Days

What do you do when Valley temperatures hit the 90s? Head for the water. Rent rafts from Curry Village and float down the Merced River, or just dip into the water next to El Capitan Meadow. There are two great swimming holes 40 minutes outside of the Park boundaries. About 10 miles west of the Highway 120 entrance station, take a left immediately after a large bridge.

Here you will have your choice of jumping off 15- to 25-foot cliffs or just kicking back next to the water. West of the Highway 140 entrance station is the Octagon, which features a rope swing, sketchy cliff and tree jumps, and great spots to kick back and have a BBQ. The directions to this place are more devious so you will have to hunt down a local Yosemite climber for information. In winter, when the Valley is too snowy, go ice skating at Curry Village or head to Badger Pass for some skiing or snowboarding. There are also a number of interesting exhibits in the Valley such as the Indian Museum, Visitors Center, and the Ansel Adams Gallery.

Don't forget the many great Yosemite hikes. Here's our favorite: park at El Cap Meadow and hike to the base of The Nose. Next, skirt the base right for about 30 minutes all the way to the edge of the Southeast Face around Zodiac. Look for booty (dropped gear from El Cap climbers) and bring a bag to pick up trash.



Justin Baillie

## SuperTopo Mission

- Help climbers ascend and descend routes quickly, efficiently, and safely by creating the most accurate and informative climbing topos ever published.
- Capture the mystery, adventure, and humor of climbing by publishing the histories, anecdotes, and outrageous stories of each route.
- Promote clean climbing by publishing the most up-to-date rack info as well as hammerless ratings for each pitch.
- Stress the importance of low impact climbing and promote stewardship of the environment.

## Visit [www.SuperTopo.com](http://www.SuperTopo.com) before each climb

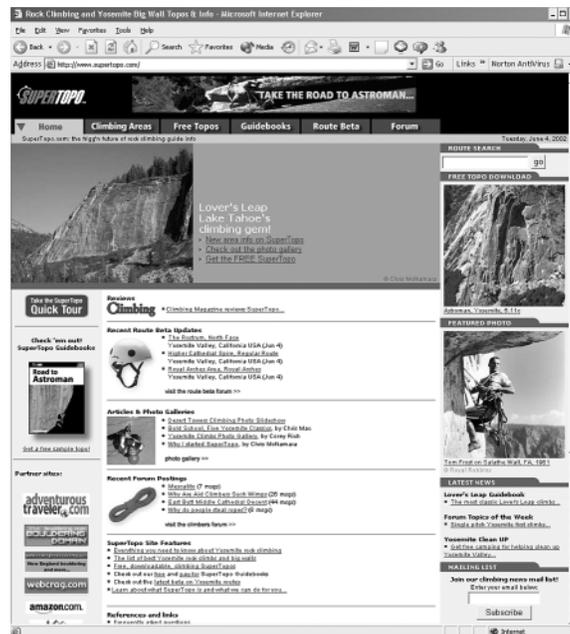
There is much more beta available for free on the SuperTopo web site: [www.supertopo.com](http://www.supertopo.com). Visit the web site before your climb to be sure you have the latest information.

The web site offers additional free beta for each climb:

- photo galleries
- trip reports
- route condition updates
- closures and rockfall warnings
- sign up for "route beta email alerts"

The web site is packed with general Yosemite info:

- free downloadable color topos
- road and weather conditions
- everything you need to know about staying in Yosemite
- good routes for first time Yosemite climbers
- general trip planning info



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## Ratings

Rating climbs is never easy, especially in a place like Yosemite with a tradition of sandbagging. In the past, even though a climb might have 5.11 moves by modern standards it could be kept at 5.10 “just because it has always been that way.” In this book we toss the sandbagged ratings in favor of accurate ones. After all, if ratings don’t accurately compare climbs, and if some 5.10s are harder than 5.11s, what is the point of a rating system? As a result, about 5 percent of the climbs in this book have been bumped up in rating from past guides. For instance, Waverly Wafer was 5.10c and now it’s 5.11a. The Steck-Salathé was 5.9 and now it’s 5.10b. This move will no doubt be controversial to some but we feel the majority of climbers will appreciate more accurate comparisons of climbs. That said, ratings are decided by discussion and consensus, so we would like to hear your criticism and feedback. Please send a note to [chris@supertopo.com](mailto:chris@supertopo.com) or post a message on our forum at [www.supertopo.com](http://www.supertopo.com).

Keep in mind the subjective nature of rating cracks. Everyone has different sized hands and feet so a 5.9 hand crack to someone with big hands might be a 5.10 fist crack for someone with small hands.

Ratings of offwidths and chimneys will seem much different than those for face routes and finger cracks. Because offwidths and chimneys are initially so foreign and unpleasant, few people dedicate the necessary time to learn the techniques. As a result, it’s no surprise that when a 5.11 sport climber jumps on his first 5.9 offwidth it usually feels like 5.12! The key point here is that it took many months and

probably years to develop face climbing technique. It will take at least that long to develop offwidth technique to the point where you can climb as hard on offwidths as you can on face climbs.

Also, because some routes with the same rating are harder or easier than other routes at that same rating, we’ve listed all the climbs in order of overall difficulty in the Appendix. For example, both Commitment and Arrowhead Arête are rated 5.9, but the latter is a much longer and more demanding climb, which is reflected by its position in the Climbs by Rating list in the Appendix.

Some climbs have an optional “A0” rating. A0 means a section you can get through by pulling on bolts or making a pendulum. For example, on Royal Arches (5.10b or 5.7 A0) the 5.10b section can be avoided with a pendulum.